"The Auburn Affirmation"

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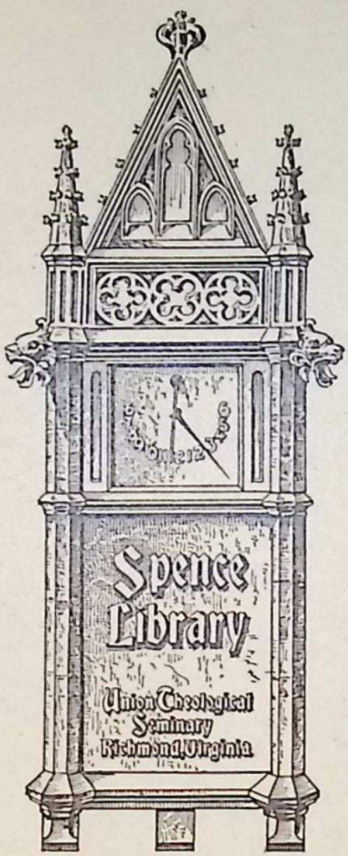

Gift of
Dr. J. V. Stephens

Union Theological Seminary
Auburn, N.Y.

"AN AFFIRMATION"

("THE AUBURN AFFIRMATION")

"Designed to Safeguard the Unity and Liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America"

With Supplemental Events,
Antecedent and Subsequent

§

Compiled and Arranged

BY

JOHN VANT STEPHENS

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Privately Printed

7 Lane Seminary Building

CINCINNATI, OHIO

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FOREWORD

"An Affirmation designed to safeguard the unity and liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America," better known as "The Auburn Affirmation," signed by 1283 ministers, was published fifteen years ago. It was promptly overtured, by the Presbytery of Cincinnati, to the General Assembly, which has "the power of deciding in all controversies respecting doctrine." (Form of Government, Chapter XII, Section V.)

The late Rev. Dr. William McKibbin, President of Lane Theological Seminary, in an able brief accompanying the overture, expressed an opinion to the General Assembly that it "is the only body constitutionally competent to finally deal with all the issues of doctrine and law involved in this 'Affirmation' ", and that "it is the only body which has jurisdiction over the affirmants, who are scattered over many Presbyteries."

For consideration and recommendation the General Assembly referred the overture to the Committee on Bills and Overtures. On the recommendation of this Committee the General Assembly voted "no action." In this way the General Assembly disposed of this overture. Notwithstanding this disposition of the overture the Affirmation, through

all these years, has been a subject of discussion. Findings of The Special Commission of Fifteen, in 1926 and 1927, quoted in these pages, are suggestive historically and ecclesiastically.

For the sake of clarity a more complete summary of this controversy than has yet been published is desirable, a summary including both antecedent and subsequent events bearing on the subject. Accordingly this epitome has been prepared. It is based on official records and indisputable facts, compiled and arranged in chronological order, so as to present an unbiased view of the subject as a whole.

JOHN VANT STEPHENS.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

PAGE

The Five Points 7

CHAPTER II

An Affirmation 19

CHAPTER III

The Cincinnati Overture 27

CHAPTER IV

The Grand Rapids Assembly 33

CHAPTER V

The Commission of Fifteen 37

CHAPTER I

The Five Points

Influences leading up to "An Affirmation designed to safeguard the unity and liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America" can be traced as far back as 1910. It was the General Assembly of that year that adopted "Certain Essential and Necessary Articles of Faith", which came to be known as the "Five Points." The General Assembly of 1916 called "the attention of the Presbyteries to the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1910" and enjoined the Presbyteries "not to license or ordain any candidates for the ministry whose views are not in accordance with this deliverance of 1910." The General Assembly of 1923 called "the attention of the Presbyteries to the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1910," and added "which deliverance is hereby reaffirmed." In these thirteen years, from 1910 to 1923, the "Certain Essential and Necessary Articles of Faith" gained a cumulative emphasis. In order that the readers may have a clear view of the deliverances of these three General Assemblies, the deliverances are quoted in full below.

1. *The General Assembly of 1910* received an overture from the Synod of Baltimore "expressing anxiety on the subject of prevalent doubts and denials as to the faith of the Church." The overture was referred to the Committee on Bills and Overtures.

The Committee on Bills and Overtures presented a special Report, which was adopted by a rising vote, and is as follows:

The Committee on Bills and Overtures would respectfully make a special Report to the Assembly pertaining to *Overture No. 66*, from the Synod of Baltimore, respecting prevalent doubts and denials of certain statements of the Confession, and also upon the reference, by the Assembly, to the Committee, of the request of the Permanent Judicial Committee for a doctrinal deliverance.

Your Committee would hereby recommend the following doctrinal deliverance, to wit:

The Church of Jesus Christ, set to be both a witness and an exemplar of saving and sanctifying truth, has come upon times when her mission is, at once, most difficult and most necessary.

It is an age of doubt. Many elements of the faith delivered, once for all, to the saints, and embodied in the immemorial testimony of the Christian Church, are by many openly questioned and rejected. Thereby the fundamentals not only of our faith as a Church, but of evangelical Christianity, are assaulted. Laxity in matters of moral opinion has been followed by laxity in matters of moral obligation. It is an age of impatience, of no restraint. The spirit of license and lawlessness is abroad. Authority in Church and State alike is decadent because its defiance has so often been unchecked. The safeguards of society are threatened. The decline in the elements of an essential religion is followed by a groveling and growing superstition that shames alike our sanity, our faith and our civilization. It is therefore most necessary that the Church of Christ should bear unflinching witness against these errors in faith and these faults in practice, by testifying to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, as God has been pleased to reveal it unto her in His Word

and by His Spirit. Actuated by that fervent charity which God has made the rule and grace of her life, she must stand sturdily for that which is at once the redemption of the individual and the redemption of society. Ours has always been a witnessing Church. It must continue to be such, or else consent to conditions of doubt that would dissolve her foundations and equally destroy historic Christianity. Therefore, this Assembly, sitting at Atlantic City, N. J., May 28, 1910, reaffirms adherence to the historic standards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as containing the system of truth taught in the Holy Scriptures:

I. By a declaration with regard to doctrinal assent.

It is to be noted that the adopting act in 1729 recognizes the holding by a candidate of "scruples" about "articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government," but at the same time the act calls upon the candidate "to declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod," and likewise calls upon the Judicatory to decide as to what is essential and necessary.

II. Accordingly the General Assembly does also make a declaration with regard to certain essential and necessary articles of faith, to wit:

1. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards, that the Holy Spirit did so inspire, guide and move the writers of the Holy Scriptures as to keep them from error. Our Confession says (see Chapter i, Section 10): "The Supreme Judge, by whom all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures."

2 It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards, that our Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. The Shorter Catechism states, Question 22: "Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin."

3. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards, that Christ offered up "himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and to reconcile us to God." The Scripture saith Christ "once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened in the Spirit." (See also Shorter Catechism, Question 25.)

4. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards, concerning our Lord Jesus, that "on the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered; with which also he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of his Father, making intercession." (See Confession, Chapter VIII, Section 4.)

5. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God as the supreme Standard of our faith, that the Lord Jesus showed his power and love by working mighty miracles. This working was not contrary to nature, but superior to it. "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people" (Matthew ix. 35). These great wonders were signs of the divine power of our Lord, making changes in the order of nature. They were equally examples, to his Church, of charity and good-will toward all mankind.

These five articles of faith are essential and necessary. Others are equally so. We need not

fear for God's truth as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and contained in our Westminster Standards. We bless God for the doctrines of His Word shining in the Standards. They stand firm like the towering beacon on the shore, casting a beam across the dark wave of this world's sin. Foolish birds and bats dart out of the night and dash themselves against the lenses of the lighthouse only to fall back senseless at its base. So heretics and sceptics have hurled themselves against the Word of God and against the Westminster Standards, only to fall back baffled and broken.

We recommend the passage of the following resolutions, to wit:

Resolved, That, reaffirming the advice of the Adopting Act of 1729, all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate for the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function, unless he declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of the Confession.

Resolved, 2. That all our parents in the home and our teachers in the schools be hereby warned of the prevalence of many insidious doubts and denials of the faith, prevalent in our times, and be urged to be diligent in teaching the children the very Word of God.

Resolved, 3. That all our pastors and Presbyteries take action to have read aloud in our churches and judicatories this doctrinal declaration of the General Assembly.

In behalf of the Committee,

JAMES M. BARKLEY, *Chairman*

2. *The General Assembly of 1916* received a number of overtures complaining against the action of the Presbytery of New York. The report of the Committee on Bills and Overture, which was adopted is as follows:

In answer to *Overtures Nos. 23, 24, 25,* and *155* to *No. 157,* and *Paper No. 153,* complaining of the action of New York Presbytery "in receiving and licensing candidates for the ministry, whose theological beliefs do not accord with the doctrinal standards of our Church," and to *Overture No. 26,* calling for a deliverance "declaring that it is not only discourteous and unwarranted, but also unchristian and subversive of proper discipline for one Presbytery to assert that the ministers of another Presbytery or Presbyteries are untrue to their ordination vows," your Committee begs to present the following report:

Commissioners from New York Presbytery and representatives of overturing Presbyteries appeared before the Committee, and made full and frank statements as to the issues involved. Complaint was made against the members of New York Presbytery for licensing recently and on previous occasions candidates who could not affirm their belief in the essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards, that our Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. The members of New York Presbytery felt deeply pained and aggrieved that the overturing Presbyteries should propose drastic action—not on the basis of the Presbytery's records, but on the basis of exaggerated and misleading newspaper reports. The brethren on both sides of the controversy, together with the members of your Committee, expressed their strong conviction that this continued agitation was bringing reproach upon the Church, was hindering the cause of Christ, and that something must be done effectually to put a stop to it. It was proposed that these brethren themselves should confer as to the best remedy for the whole trouble. Having done so in a most earnest, prayerful and forbearing spirit, they presented a paper

which, to their minds, embodies all that the exigencies of the situation demand, and which gives them great hope for the future peace and harmony of the Church. Your Committee gave this paper due consideration, and were grateful to God for the manifest leading of the Holy Spirit, which had brought the aggrieved parties together, and which, we felt, led us, your Committee, to the unanimous approval of said paper, as the basis of suitable action on the part of the Assembly.

We, therefore, recommend the adoption of this paper, in the earnest hope that it will allay all misunderstanding—prevent, in the future, any hasty or ill-advised judgment, in public print, of brethren in good and regular standing in the ministry, and serve as a warning to all Presbyteries against receiving and licensing any candidates for the ministry who cannot give their assent to all the fundamental doctrines of the Church. This paper, thus recommended, is as follows:

WHEREAS, The records of the Presbytery of New York show that on April 10, 1916, that Presbytery licensed three candidates for the ministry, who neither affirmed nor denied the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, on the following recommendation, "noting that these candidates recognize critical difficulties in connection with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, but at the same time state that their faith in this doctrine is of a growing character, and that they unqualifiedly declare their faith in the pre-existence and Deity of our Lord and all the redemptive truth that is embodied in His life, teaching, and His sacrificial death."

WHEREAS, It is admitted that by the Constitution of the Church each Presbytery is the judge of qualifications of candidates for the ministry, but each Presbytery in licensing these candidates should strictly observe the declarations of the Confession of Faith in doctrinal matters.

The General Assembly calls the attention of the Presbyteries to the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1910, which is as follows:

1. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that the Holy Spirit did so inspire, guide and move the writers of Holy Scripture as to keep them from error;

2. It is an esential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that our Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary;

3. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that Christ offered up "Himself a sacrifice to satisfy Divine justice and to reconcile us to God;"

4. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and of our standards concerning our Lord Jesus Christ that on the third day he arose again from the dead with the same body with which he suffered, with which also he ascended into heaven and there sitteth at the right hand of His Father, making intercession;

5. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God as the supreme standard of our faith that our Lord Jesus showed his power and love by working mighty miracles. This working was not contrary to nature, but superior to it."

Presbyteries, therefore, are hereby *enjoined not to license or ordain any candidate for the ministry whose views are not in accordance with this deliverance of 1910.*

This General Assembly renews its positive mandate, with full expectation of loyal compliance by all our Presbyteries; and directs when a candidate appears who is found to be not clear and positive on any one of the fundamentals of our faith, that his licensure be deferred until such time as in the judgment of the Presbytery he has become so.

3. *The General Assembly of 1923* received an overture 1 (a) from the Presbytery of Philadel-

phia on which two reports were submitted by the Committee on Bills and Overtures. The minority report was adopted and is as follows:

The 135th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America in answer to the Petition of the Overture presented by the Presbytery of Philadelphia regarding the public proclamation of the word in the Pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, expresses its profound sorrow that doctrines contrary to the standards of the Presbyterian Church, proclaimed in said Pulpit have been the cause of controversy and division in our Church and therefore would direct the Presbytery of New York to take such action, (either through its present Committee or by the appointment of a special commission) as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York to conform to the system of doctrines taught in the Confession of Faith; and that said Presbytery report its action in a full transcript of its records to the 136th General Assembly of 1924.

Furthermore, the General Assembly calls the attention of the Presbyteries to the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1910, which deliverance is hereby reaffirmed, and which is as follows:

1. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that the Holy Spirit did so inspire, guide and move the writers of Holy Scripture as to keep them from error.

2. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that our Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.

3. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that Christ offered up Himself a sacrifice to satisfy Divine justice and to reconcile us to God.

4. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of

God and of our standards concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, that on the third day He rose again from the dead with the same body with which He suffered, with which also He ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of His Father, making intercession.

5. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God as the supreme standard of our faith that our Lord Jesus showed His power and love by working mighty miracles. This working was not contrary to nature, but superior to it."

The following protest against the action taken by the General Assembly in connection with Overture 1 was presented and placed on record:

The Undersigned Commissioners at the 135th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, meeting at Indianapolis, May, 1923, hereby enter their respectful protest against the action taken by the Assembly in connection with Overture No. 1.

1. We protest against the action taken, because it was based upon allegations made by one Presbytery in regard to conditions in another Presbytery which are not substantiated by the evidence.

2. We protest against the action taken, because it passes judgment on a matter which is not now, and never has been, before the Assembly by orderly process, and condemns without proper hearing.

3. We protest against the action taken, because it seeks to impose upon the office bearers of our Church, doctrinal tests other than, or in addition to those solemnly agreed upon in the Constitution of our Church.

We present this protest for record on the minutes of the Assembly.

It will be observed that the protesters, in item three, anticipated a judgment of the Judicial Com-

mission rendered in 1924. In that judgment the Commission quotes an overture from the Presbytery of Philadelphia, in which the Presbytery asks the General Assembly "to direct that all who represent the Church on the Boards, General Council, Theological Seminaries and every other agency of the Church, be required to affirm or reaffirm their faith in the Standards of the Church, together with the historic interpretations as contained in the doctrinal deliverances of the General Assembly, notably that of 1910, which has been twice reaffirmed by the General Assembly, said deliverances not being regarded as an addition to or substitute for the doctrinal standards of the Church, but as a declaration that these doctrines as stated in said Standards are essential to the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures."

In its judgment the Judicial Commission said: "The effect of the proposed overture is to impose additional requirements upon all representatives of the Church, on Boards, the General Council, the Theological Seminaries, and every other agency of the Church." . . . "We hold," says the Commission, "that additional qualifications cannot be imposed by legislative action of the Assembly without concurrent action of the Presbyteries." . . . Finally, "the Constitution of our Church clearly specifies the doctrinal requirements for ministers and elders, and that any change in these must be by concurrent action of the Assembly and Presbyteries; the only method provided for amendment or modification." (Minutes, pp. 197, 198.)

CHAPTER II

An Affirmation

It appears that the repeated deliverances of the General Assembly (1910, 1916 and 1923), with the cumulative emphasis placed upon "Certain Essential and Necessary Articles of Faith" led a number of ministers to believe that an attempt was being made "to amend the Constitution in an unconstitutional manner." This conviction resulted in the drafting of "An Affirmation designed to safeguard the unity and liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America." This Affirmation was signed by 1283 ministers. It follows:

We, the undersigned, ministers of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, feel bound, in view of certain actions of the General Assembly of 1923 and of persistent attempts to divide the church and abridge its freedom, to express our convictions in matters pertaining thereto. At the outset we affirm and declare our acceptance of the Westminster Confession of Faith, as we did at our ordinations, "as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." We sincerely hold and earnestly preach the doctrines of evangelical Christianity, in agreement with the historic testimony of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, of which we are loyal ministers. For the maintenance of the faith of our church, the preservation of its unity,

and the protection of the liberties of its ministers and people, we offer this Affirmation.

I. By its law and its history, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America safeguards the liberty of thought and teaching of its ministers. At their ordinations they "receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." This the church has always esteemed a sufficient doctrinal subscription for its ministers. Manifestly it does not require their assent to the very words of the Confession, or to all of its teachings, or to interpretations of the Confession by individuals or church courts. The Confession of Faith itself disclaims infallibility. Its authors would not allow this to church councils, their own included: "All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both" (Conf. XXXI, iii). The Confession also expressly asserts the liberty of Christian believers, and condemns the submission of the mind or conscience to any human authority: "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also." (Conf. XX, ii).

The formal relation of American Presbyterianism to the Westminster Confession of Faith begins in the Adopting Act of 1729. This anticipated and provided for dissent by individuals from portions of the Confession. At the formation of the Presby-

terian Church in the United States of America, in 1788, the Westminster Confession was adopted as the creed of the church; and at the same time the church publicly declared the significance of its organization in a document which contains these words: "There are truths and forms, with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these they think it the duty, both of private Christians and Societies, to exercise mutual forbearance towards each other." (Declaration of Principles, v).

Of the two parts into which our church was separated from 1837 to 1870, one held that only one interpretation of certain parts of the Confession of Faith was legitimate, while the other maintained its right to dissent from this interpretation. In the Reunion of 1870 they came together on equal terms, "each recognizing the other as a sound and orthodox body." The meaning of this, as understood then and ever since, is that office-bearers in the church who maintain their liberty in the interpretation of the Confession are exercising their rights guaranteed by the terms of the Reunion.

A more recent reunion also is significant, that of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, in 1906. This reunion was opposed by certain members of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, on the ground that the two churches were not at one in doctrine; yet it was consummated. Thus did our church once more exemplify its historic policy of accepting theological differences within its bounds and subordinating them to recognized loyalty to Jesus Christ and united work for the kingdom of God.

With respect to the interpretation of the Scriptures the position of our church has been that

common to Protestants. "The Supreme Judge," says the Confession of Faith, "by whom all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." (Conf. I, x). Accordingly our church has held that the supreme guide in the interpretation of the Scriptures is not, as it is with Roman Catholics, ecclesiastical authority, but the Spirit of God, speaking to the Christian believer. Thus our church lays it upon its ministers and others to read and teach the Scriptures as the Spirit of God through His manifold ministries instructs them, and to receive all truth which from time to time He causes to break forth from the Scriptures.

There is no assertion in the Scriptures that their writers were kept "from error." The Confession of Faith does not make this assertion; and it is significant that this assertion is not to be found in the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed or in any of the great Reformation confessions. The doctrine of inerrancy, intended to enhance the authority of the Scriptures, in fact impairs their supreme authority for faith and life, and weakens the testimony of the church to the power of God unto salvation through Jesus Christ. We hold that the General Assembly of 1923, in asserting that "the Holy Spirit did so inspire, guide and move the writers of Holy Scripture as to keep them from error," spoke without warrant of the Scriptures or of the Confession of Faith. We hold rather to the words of the Confession of Faith, that the Scriptures "are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life." (Conf. I, ii).

II. While it is constitutional for any General Assembly "to bear testimony against error in doc-

trine," (Form of Govt. XII, v), yet such testimony is without binding authority, since the constitution of our church provides that its doctrine shall be declared only by concurrent action of the General Assembly and the presbyteries. Thus the church guards the statement of its doctrine against hasty or ill-considered action by either General Assemblies or presbyteries. From this provision of our constitution, it is evident that neither in one General Assembly nor in many, without concurrent action of the presbyteries, is there authority to declare what the Presybterian Church in the United States of America believes and teaches; and that the assumption that any General Assembly has authoritatively declared what the church believes and teaches is groundless. A declaration by a General Assembly that any doctrine is "an essential doctrine" attempts to amend the constitution of the church in an unconstituional manner.

III. The General Assembly of 1923, in asserting that "doctrines contrary to the standards of the Presbyterian Church" have been preached in the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, virtually pronounced a judgment against this church. The General Assembly did this with knowledge that the matter on which it so expressed itself was already under formal consideration in the Presbytery of New York, as is shown by the language of its action. The General Assembly acted in the case without giving hearing to the parties concerned. Thus the General Assembly did not conform to the procedure in such cases contemplated by our Book of Discipline, and, what is more serious, it in effect condemned a Christian minister without using the method of conference, patience and love enjoined on us by Jesus Christ. We object to the action of the Gen-

eral Assembly in this case, as being out of keeping with the law and the spirit of our church.

IV. The General Assembly of 1923 expressed the opinion concerning five doctrinal statements that each one "is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards." On the constitutional grounds which we have before described, we are opposed to any attempt to elevate these five doctrinal statements, or any of them, to the position of tests for ordination or for good standing in our church.

Furthermore, this opinion of the General Assembly attempts to commit our church to certain theories concerning the inspiration of the Bible, and the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Continuing Life and Supernatural Power of our Lord Jesus Christ. *We all hold most earnestly to these great facts and doctrines; we all believe from our hearts that the writers of the Bible were inspired of God; that Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh; that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, and through Him we have our redemption; that having died for our sins He rose from the dead and is our ever-living Saviour; that in His earthly ministry He wrought many mighty works, and by His vicarious death and unfailing presence He is able to save to the uttermost.* Some of us regard the particular theories contained in the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship.

V. We do not desire liberty to go beyond the teachings of evangelical Christianity. But we maintain that it is our constitutional right and our Christian duty within these limits to exercise liberty of thought and teaching, that we may more effectively preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World.

VI. *Finally, we deplore the evidences of division in our beloved church, in the face of a world so desperately in need of a united testimony to the gospel of Christ. We earnestly desire fellowship with all who like us are disciples of Jesus Christ. We hope that those to whom this Affirmation comes will believe that it is not the declaration of a theological party, but rather a sincere appeal, based on the Scriptures and our standards, for the preservation of the unity and freedom or our church, for which most earnestly we plead and pray.*

CHAPTER III

The Cincinnati Overture

The late Rev. Dr. William McKibbin, then President of Lane Theological Seminary, located in Cincinnati, Ohio, addressed a printed communication of about 600 words "To the Ministers and Elders of the Presbytery of Cincinnati," in which he stated that it was his "purpose" to ask the Presbytery, meeting March 17, 1924, "to overture this document (An affirmation), with the signatures, to the next General Assembly, which is to meet at Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the fourth Thursday of May, 1924." "The General Assembly," he said, "is the only body competent to deal with the issues of doctrine and law involved in this paper." As indicated in his notice, Dr. McKibbin presented his overture to the Presbytery. The presbyterial minutes show that "debate on the overture was postponed until the April meeting of the Presbytery."

The presbyterial records show that on April 21, 1924, "an overture to the General Assembly, presented by W. McKibbin at the March meeting, was, on motion, adopted without a negative vote." The overture is as follows:

Mr. Moderator, Fathers, and Brethren:

The Presbytery of Cincinnati would respectfully place in your hands the accompanying pamphlet, entitled, "An Affirmation," that you may be "well advised" of its contents and purposes and that

your venerable body may exercise intelligently, under the guidance of the Divine Spirit, its "powers of deciding in all controversies respecting doctrine; of reproving, warning, or bearing testimony against error in doctrine, or immorality in practice, in any church, Presbytery or Synod;" "and of suppressing schismatical contentions and disputation." (Form of Government XII, Section 5.)

This overture, with the signatures then attached to the Affirmation, was forwarded to the General Assembly. In order that the commissioners to the Assembly might be "well advised" of the "contents and purposes" of the Affirmation, Dr. McKibbin had it reprinted for distribution among the commissioners. For a facsimile of the first page of this reprint, see page 42. Dr. McKibbin prepared and had printed a brief, following the overture, for distribution among the commissioners. For a facsimile of the title page of this pamphlet, see page 43.

Dr. McKibbin's brief follows:

The Affirmation declares that "a declaration by the General Assembly that any doctrine is an essential doctrine attempts to amend the Constitution of the Church in an unconstitutional manner." It challenges the authority of the General Assembly of 1910, and succeeding Assemblies, including the last, to make or reaffirm the following deliverances:

1. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards that the Holy Spirit did so inspire and guide and move the writers of Holy Scripture as to keep them from error.

2. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards that our Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.

3. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards that Christ offered Him-

self a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and to reconcile us to God.

4 "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards, concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, that on the third day he arose again from the dead with the same body with which He suffered, with which also He ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of His Father, making intercession.

5. "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God, as the Supreme standard of our faith, that our Lord Jesus showed his power and love by working mighty miracles. This working was not contrary to nature, but superior to it."

This document further specifically affirms:

A. That the ordination vow of ministers in our Church does not require assent "to the interpretations of the Confession by "church courts," of which your honorable body is declared by the Constitution of the Church: "to be the highest judicatory," "representing in one body all the particular churches of this denomination."

B. It affirms that the Adopting Act in 1729, by which American Presbyterianism formally connected itself with the Westminster Confession of Faith, "anticipated and provided for dissent by individuals from portions of the Confession;" but the affirmants fail to indicate the portions of the Confession from which, by said Act, no dissent is allowed, namely:

"We are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity. And do therefore agree that all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter

Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being, in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith.

"And we do also agree, that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate for the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function, but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession." "And in case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministery, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or catechisms," . . . "if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them uncapable of communion with them."

C. This paper affirms that neither the Holy Scriptures nor Confession of Faith assert that the inspired writers were kept "from error."

D. That "the General Assembly of 1923, in asserting that doctrines contrary to the Standards of the Presbyterian Church have been preached in the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City had exceeded its authority," and was "out of keeping with the law and spirit of our Church," notwithstanding the sermon which contained such doctrines was published in printed form, after careful supervision, and had wide distribution, and such doctrines spoke for themselves; and the Presbytery of Philadelphia had "fully advised" the General Assembly, and mandatory jurisdiction had attached to the General Assembly. Sec. 76, 77, Book of Discipline: "Judicatories may sometimes neglect to perform their duty, by which

neglect heretical opinions or corrupt practices may be allowed to gain ground." "If, therefore, at any time, the superior judicatory is well advised of such neglect, ommissions, or irregularities of the inferior judicatory, it may require its records to be produced, and *shall* either proceed to examine and decide the whole matter, as *completely* as if the proper record had been made; or it *shall* cite the lower judicatory, and proceed as in the next preceding section."

As the General Assembly is the only body constitutionally competent to finally deal with all the issues of doctrine and law involved in this "Affirmation"; and it is required by the Constitution that: "it shall give its advice and instruction, in all cases submitted to it, in conformity with the Constitution of the Church; and it shall constitute the bond of union, peace, correspondence and mutual confidence among all our churches;" and as it is the only body which has jurisdiction over the affirmants, who are scattered over many Presbyteries, the Presbytery of Cincinnati earnestly and prayerfully urge that you as the supreme judicatory of our Church, will exercise your power, in the fear of God, and in accordance with the Constitution of the Church, for the guardianship of the necessary and essential doctrines of our most holy faith, "and the promotion of charity, truth and holiness through all the churches under your care."

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CHAPTER IV

The Grand Rapids Assembly

The One Hundred and Thirty-sixth General Assembly met in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on May 22, 1924. The Rev. Dr. Clarence E. Macartney and the Rev. Dr. Charles R. Erdman were placed in nomination for Moderator. The vote resulted in 464 for Dr. Macartney and 446 for Dr. Erdman. After the ballot the election of Dr. Macartney was made unanimous. The late Rev. Dr. Francis C. Monfort, for over fifty years editor of the Herald and Presbyter, dean of the Presbyterian press, reporting for his paper stated that "a large number of conservative men voted for Dr. Erdman out of friendship and personal regard, but he received also the entire vote of the liberal or modernistic element, who were thus known to be largely in the minority." If, as Dr. Monfort states, the liberal element were "largely in the minority," then it follows, of course, that the conservative element were "largely" in the majority. No man in the Church was better qualified to express an opinion on the comparative strength of the two groups than Dr. Monfort. He had had a wide acquaintance in the Church for over half a century. He had attended the meetings of the General Assembly with regularity for fifty years.

The Assembly was organized by the conservative element. As indicated Dr. Macartney was elected Moderator. He appointed the late Hon.

William Jennings Bryan Vice-Moderator. The Committee on Bills and Overtures heads the list of Standing Committees. The Moderator appointed the Rev. Dr. Maitland Alexander Chairman of this important Committee. Mr. Bryan, the Vice-Moderator, was also a member of this Committee. Dr. Macartney, Dr. Alexander and Mr. Bryan were all recognized as outstanding leaders among the conservative element.

The Cincinnati Overture, numbered 60, entitled "On the Affirmation Designed to Safeguard the Unity and Liberty of the Church—from the Presbytery of Cincinnati," was received by the Assembly. (See Minutes, page 27.) The overture was referred, with many other documents, to "the Standing Committee on Bills and Overtures, for reference to the proper Committees." (See Minutes, page 22.) The Committee on Bills and Overtures did not refer this overture to any other Committee but, as it had a right to do, retained it for its own consideration and recommendation to the General Assembly.

Among others, Dr. McKibbin appeared before the Committee. Here he doubtless presented the same arguments against the Affirmation that he had published in his pamphlet for circulation among the commissioners. In this publication he stated that "the General Assembly is the only body constitutionally competent to finally deal with all the issues of doctrine and law involved in this 'Affirmation'" and further that the Assembly "is the only body which has jurisdiction over the affirmants, who are scattered over many Presbyteries." The publication closed as follows: "The Presbytery of Cincinnati earnestly and prayerfully urge that you, as the supreme judicatory of our Church, will exercise your power, in the fear of God, and in accordance with the Constitution of the Church,

for the guardianship of the necessary and essential doctrines of our most holy faith."

Dr. Alexander, the Chairman of the Committee, has stated that "the Cincinnati Overture was leisurely debated in the Committee." "Leisurely" is correct, for the Committee held the overture five days before reporting on it. The report on the Cincinnati Overture was made, with others, near the close of the Assembly. The report of the Committee on the Cincinnati Overture is as follows: "Overture 60.—On the Affirmation Designed to Safeguard the Unity and Liberty of the Church. Recommended that no action be taken." (See Minutes, page 202.) The Assembly adopted the report. There was no minority report. There was no protest.

CHAPTER V

The Commission of Fifteen

"At the request of the Moderator [Rev. Dr. Charles R. Erdman], the General Assembly adopted the following resolution: That a Commission of Fifteen members be appointed to study the present spiritual condition of our Church and the causes making for unrest, and report to the next General Assembly, to the end that purity, peace, unity and progress of the Church may be assured." (Minutes, 1925, page 88.) The Commission was continued another year. This Commission was composed of fifteen able ministers and elders, headed by a former Moderator of the General Assembly, the Rev. Dr. Henry C. Swearingen, not one of whom had signed the Auburn Affirmation. This Commission was appointed one year after the General Assembly had voted "no action" on the Cincinnati Overture. The Commission was charged with the study of "the causes making for unrest." That the Auburn Affirmation was such a cause no one will question. Some excerpts from the report of the Commission bear directly on the Affirmation.

In its report which the General Assembly adopted in 1926 the Commission says that it "feels that the General Assembly has given to it a mandate to promote the purity and peace of the Church. If there be any constitutional way of stilling unrest and adjusting differences, the Commission believes itself obligated to find that way. . . . The Commission is not willing

to deceive itself as to the gravity of the situation confronting the Church, nor does it desire to see others misled. . . . All parties appear to be willing to rest upon the Constitution of the Church as it stands. They are agreed that remedies for our trouble are within the Constitution itself. This is an immense advantage. It leaves to be decided the question of interpretation only."

"There has been and is divergence of views," says the Commission, "with regard to the so-called 'Five Points' of the General Assembly's deliverances of 1910, 1916 and 1923. Some have held that it was altogether competent and right for the Assembly to single out these doctrines and to declare them 'essential.' Others have held that such a discriminatory selection was not warranted, that some of the doctrines are not stated in terms either of the Scriptures or the Standards, and that the word 'essential' is itself indefinite and open to misconception. For whom and to what are these doctrines essential?'" (Minutes, 1926, page 69.)

The reaction on the part of a large number of ministers from the deliverances of the General Assembly in 1910, 1916 and 1923 led to the drafting of the Affirmation. On this point the Commission said: "When the General Assembly as a non-judicial body makes deliverances, they are entitled to great respect and defference, but they are subject to modification or repeal at any time by a majority vote of the General Assembly. . . . It would be intolerable if the General Assembly, whose powers are limited by the Constitution, could, even when sitting as a judicial court, amend by indirection, the organic law of the Church, which contains within itself provisions for effecting orderly change. . . . The constitution of the Presbyterian Church can be amended only by the General As-

sembly and the Presbyteries acting concurrently, according to methods defined in the Constitution."

The Commission reported further in 1927. Its report was unanimously adopted. In this report it says: "The General Assembly, when acting in its judicial capacity, has a right to decide questions of this kind only as they apply to the specific case under consideration and as the decision may be affected by all the circumstances of that case. Should the doctrinal beliefs of a candidate be challenged in a judicial action as not being of a character to qualify him under our Constitution for preaching the gospel, it is competent for the General Assembly to decide that, in view of all the conditions surrounding this particular case, the opinions which the candidate holds are not such as to fit him for the office of the ministry in the Presbyterian Church; but this is quite different from deciding, as a general proposition, that certain articles, when considered abstractly and logically, are essential and necessary to the system of doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures. It follows from the above that the decision of a particular case involving this issue, when rendered by the General Assembly acting in its judicial capacity, cannot be made to rest properly upon a merely declaratory deliverance of a former Assembly. A judicial decision is grounded in the Constitution itself and derives its chief additional support from similar decisions arrived at in the same manner and resting upon the same foundation.

"It seems quite clear, furthermore, that, granting for the moment the authority of the General Assembly, acting in any capacity, to declare broadly that an article is essential and necessary, it would be required to quote the exact language of the article as it appears in the Confession of Faith. It could not paraphrase the language nor use other

terms than those employed within the Constitution, much less could it erect into essential and necessary articles doctrines only derived as inferences from the statements of the Confession."

The Commission affirms "that the Presbyterian system admits of diversity of view where the core of truth is identical. . . . The Church has flourished best and showed most clearly the good hand of God upon it, when it laid aside its tendencies to stress differences, and put the emphasis on its unity of spirit. . . . The principles of toleration when rightly conceived and frankly and fairly applied is as truly a part of our Constitution as are any of the doctrines stated in that instrument. Not only is the principle expressed in definite terms, but its place and authority as a part of our organic law is further indicated in a number of articles by clear and necessary implication. Furthermore, it is recognized through unbroken practice in the administration of our form of government and our discipline. . . . [But] the liberty which toleration allows is not to be judged finally by individuals. It is freedom with boundaries, and these boundaries are fixed by constitutional authority. . . . It follows, therefore, that whenever a question arises as to where these limits are, the issue must be decided by the organization and not by the individual members of it. As applied within the Presbyterian Church, this means that such issues will be determined either *generally*, by amendment of the Constitution, or *particularly*, by presbyterial authority, subject to the constitutional right of appeal."

"The various groups in the present discussion," says the Commission, "declare their approval of and adherence to our Constitution. These declarations must be accepted as sincere. All assert that the Constitution is the only adequate test of Pres-

byterianism. The Church has many times solved its difficulties by this criterion alone."

Finally, "if we are to have peace and purity in the Church, all slander and misrepresentation must be brought to an end. The Spirit of Christ must be allowed to bring forth His fruits among us and all evil speaking must be put away, to the end that 'speaking truth in love, we may grow up in all things into Him, who is the head, even Christ; from whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love.' "

AN AFFIRMATION

DESIGNED TO SAFEGUARD THE UNITY AND LIBERTY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Submitted for the Consideration of Its Ministers and People.

We, the undersigned, ministers of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, feel bound, in view of certain actions of the General Assembly of 1923 and of persistent attempts to divide the Church and abridge its freedom, to express our convictions in matters pertaining thereto. At the outset we affirm and declare our acceptance of the Westminster Confession of Faith, as we did at our ordinations, "as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." We sincerely hold and earnestly preach the doctrines of evangelical Christianity, in agreement with the historic testimony of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, of which we are loyal ministers. For the maintenance of the faith of our Church, the preservation of its unity, and

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The above is a facsimile of the first page of the McKibbin reprinted "An Affirmation" for distribution among the commissioners to the Grand Rapids General Assembly. (See page 28, second paragraph.)

To the

General Assembly

OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE U. S. A.

Which meets at

Grand Rapids, Michigan

The Fourth Thursday of May, 1924

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The above is a facsimile of the title page of the folder containing the McKibbin brief for distribution among the commissioners to the Grand Rapids General Assembly. (See page 28, second paragraph.)